

Violence Sells... But Who's Buying?
by Gabriel Kuhn

and

Misrepresentations, but Substantial Differences as Well
by Peter Gelderloos

The Failure of Nonviolence: From the Arab Spring to Occupy is
available from Left Bank Books, leftbankbooks.bigcartel.com

a discussion of
The Failure of Nonviolence: From the Arab Spring to Occupy

Violence Sells... But Who's Buying?

This essay is a review of The Failure of Nonviolence: From the Arab Spring to Occupy by Peter Gelderloos (Seattle: Left Bank Books, 2013)

Originally posted at alpineanarchist.org

WHEN, SOME MONTHS AGO, I read on thegild.blogspot.se that Peter Gelderloos was among someone's "favourite activist writers", I wasn't surprised. Gelderloos writes from the perspective of an active participant in numerous social struggles, manages to do this without any bothersome academic jargon, lays out his arguments well, and furthers debate about subjects central to revolutionary movements. All of this also applies to his latest publication, *The Failure of Nonviolence: From the Arab Spring to Occupy*, published by Seattle's Left Bank Books.

If the arguments in *The Failure of Nonviolence* – and, in fact, the title – remind readers of Gelderloos's popular 2005 book *How Nonviolence Protects the State* [1], this is no surprise either. As Gelderloos himself states in the "Comments on *How Nonviolence Protects the State*", added as an appendix to *The Failure of Nonviolence*, the latter was originally conceived as an updated version of the former, until the author decided "it would be better to write a new book rather than try to revise the earlier one" (p. 284).

The key arguments of both books are the same: "violence" is a terribly vague term that only confuses discussion about tactics and strategy; "proponents of nonviolence" – as Gelderloos likes to call them – write social movement history in ways that fit their own ideological assumptions; and many nonviolent activists [2] hinder revolutionary developments with their non-confrontational tactics, at times even betraying and endangering those who do not abide by their directives.

What is new in *The Failure of Nonviolence* is an application of this critique to political developments of the last fifteen years, detailed engagements with prominent advocates of nonviolence (among them Gene Sharp, the Dalai Lama, and Bob Geldof), and responses to critics of *How Nonviolence Protects the State*.

A short evaluation of the *The Failure of Nonviolence* could simply read thus: Once again, Gelderloos skillfully and convincingly discloses the hypocrisy, short-sightedness, and (privilege-based) moralism of many nonviolence advocates. Yet, this would make a blurb rather than a review. So I'll try something else: namely, a critique of a few elements of the book, based on agreeing with its basic assumptions. It is a bit of a risky undertaking, since it can easily lead to irritation in all camps. The divides in the (non)violence debate are deep and public self-criticism can easily be interpreted as aiding the opponent. Gelderloos alludes to this, when stating: "In my experience, the unfair and often manipulative generalizations made by supporters of nonviolence make it much harder for conflictive anarchists to make these self-criticisms openly." (p. 30) As much as I agree that

one has to be precise in formulating one's critique in order not to supply the wrong forces, I don't think that completely abstaining from public self-criticism can be the answer. It would rather be the end of any productive debate and only further deepen the divides that often make such a debate so difficult.

Some Personal Background

IN ORDER TO AVOID MISCONCEPTIONS as far as possible, let me spell out some of the personal background on which this review is written: I was politicized in the context of the German autonomous movement of the late 1980s. "Militant action", as we called it, was a given part of our politics. That included participating in black blocs (as most people know, black blocs are a product of the German autonomous movement), a generally confrontational attitude towards the police and other state representatives, and clandestine direct action (spraying graffiti, gluing locks, smashing windows, etc.). To this day, I do not question the legitimacy of such action in the context of social struggles.

On top of that, the reflection on the experiences of the urban guerrilla groups in Germany (and beyond) of the 1970s was extremely important among the radicals of my generation. Despite all of the autonomous critique of the urban guerrilla groups, their members were always considered to be comrades. What mattered was a strategic evaluation of their struggle, not moral condemnation.

I am utterly convinced that the use of "violent", "militant", or "combative" tactics (the final adjective is the one preferred by Gelderloos – more on terminology later) will always be an inevitable part of social movements and that it is more important to develop a tactically and strategically sound way of relating to them than to get caught up in abstract ethical debates. I am not, and have never been, a nonviolent anarchist.

Okay, so much for that. Now let's turn to the problems I find in *The Failure of Nonviolence* amidst all of its merits.

Is Nonviolence Monolithic?

IT IS IMPORTANT to note that some experiences which seem to have motivated Gelderloos to write the book differ from mine. This probably needs to be considered throughout the entire review (although certain parts are more affected by it than others). It is up to the individual readers to determine whether Gelderloos's experiences or mine are closer to their own. The relevance of what I have to say will largely depend on this.

Gelderloos's characterization of "nonviolence" is not entirely clear. On the one hand, he categorically defines it as "an attempt to force nonviolent methods across an entire movement", adding in a footnote that "to be a proponent of nonviolence is not to simply prefer peace, but to sign up to the peace police and attempt to determine the course of the whole movement" (p. 19). On the other hand, he also speaks of "dogmatic nonviolence" (p. 11), "nonviolence as an absolute philosophy" (p. 241), and "nonviolence as an exclusive methodology" (p. 281), suggesting that there are also other – acceptable – forms of nonviolence. While this can be confusing at times, it is certainly the former notion – nonviolence as an

of nonviolence on an international scale are actively trying to erase the history, presence, and possibility of any forms of struggle that are not strictly nonviolent.

I would also be interested in discussing how harshly or gently we should criticize comrades or potential allies when we perceive them to have done some pretty horrible things (i.e. things that would make us no longer consider them comrades, like working with the police).

And I would love it if you would talk more about how a successful diversity of tactics works between "militants" and proponents of nonviolence in the place where you are active.

Thank you for starting this debate.

IN SOLIDARITY,
Peter

I am curious, though, if you think that I succeed in being less insulting, and more open to the possibility of working together or engaging in self-criticism than in *How Nonviolence Protects the State*. That was my goal. I wonder if I succeeded.

Conclusion

I WOULD LIKE TO CONCLUDE by highlighting points that can make for a fruitful debate, if we or any readers were to continue this conversation. First I want to summarize a counter-criticism that I have after reading your review.

To phrase it as kindly as possible, I do not think you did a good job of reading my book nor of responding to what I actually wrote. This is important because a debate cannot advance if one person's criticisms are based on a distortion or a hasty misreading of the other person's actual beliefs.

Fortunately, I think you did an excellent job of framing the debate in a friendly, constructive way. As you've no doubt noticed, that is not one of my strong suits, and the tone you set made it much easier for me to respond.

So if I may, these are what I have identified as the important disagreements between us that are not based on simple misunderstanding. Feel free to add any I have left out.

Terminology: I feel that violence is a counterproductive category, you feel that it still makes sense. I pointed out what I saw as confusion and ambiguity in your analysis, caused by your continued use of the category "violence". What do you think?

Unity: You think that unity is important, but have not said anything regarding my actual critique of unity. I added a few more specific historical examples that show the pitfalls of unity.

Strategy: You stated that strategy is dependent on having a goal, whereas I critiqued the idea of strategy as a path to a set goal, stating that such an idea was based on a liberal and rationalist worldview and on an alienation of means and ends. I argued for a positional, relational, and contingent vision of strategy directed towards a goal that is constantly reenvisioned on the basis of an evolving present struggle, a goal that is utopic or horizontal, as in constantly receding, rather than a fixed destination we can presently define and expect to reach in the future.

Clear lines: Unless I misunderstood, you expressed a preference for clear lines of acceptable and unacceptable tactics and debate about these boundaries, I expressed a preference for continuous debate about acceptable actions that would never result in consensus.

Diversity of tactics: You stated it was a no-brainer that a diversity of tactics is better than strict nonviolence, I stated that it should be a no-brainer but that proponents

exclusive, dogmatic, and absolute position – that dominates Gelderloos's account. And this is where our perceptions differ. While my experiences with the "peace police" are limited [3], I know plenty of nonviolent activists whose outlook I treasure, who I happily collaborate with in certain campaigns, and who I wholeheartedly respect as radical comrades.

This might, in fact, seem ironic given my background in the German radical milieu. Next to a strong, and militant, autonomous movement, Germany also has a very strong nonviolent anarchist current. The country's biggest anarchist newspaper, *graswurzelrevolution*, was founded in 1972 in the context of the anti-nuclear and peace movement and explicitly embraces nonviolent anarchism to this day. Yet, it is perhaps the long coexistence of militant action and nonviolent activism that has led to a fairly relaxed attitude toward the (non)violence debate. Yes, the debate flares up every so often, but the arguments are always the same, the differences are clear, and, once the ritualistic claims have been made, everyone gets back to their daily business. The "diversity of tactics" that Gelderloos advocates in *The Failure of Nonviolence* has long been a "fact on the ground", a reality that everyone has to relate to, whether they like it or not. [4]

So, when Gelderloos writes about an "outrage" with respect to proponents of nonviolence, and about how "angry" he feels about their conduct (p. 285), then he talks about sentiments that I don't share. This is, of course, not to say that Gelderloos doesn't have a right to his outrage and anger. I'm sure he's had plenty of experiences to justify them. I just haven't.

Not all of the differences between Gelderloos's perspective and mine are based on different experiences, however. Some concern theoretical aspects. Let us now focus on those.

I. Terminology: "Violence doesn't exist" – Really?

THE FIRST CHAPTER of *The Failure of Nonviolence* is entitled "Violence Doesn't Exist". Allow me to go off on a short tangent: When Slayer released the album *God Hates Us All*, the band's vocalist Tom Araya was asked if he really believed that was true. His answer was, "No, God doesn't hate us – but it's a really good title." "Violence Doesn't Exist" is a really good title, too – but its message is not very convincing.

1. The argument is mainly rhetorical. To explain why violence doesn't exist, Gelderloos says, that "it is not a *thing*" (p. 20). Alright. But neither is the state, capitalism, racism, sexism, or anarchy. Does this mean that none of these phenomena exist? ... Gelderloos mentions the numerous workshops on nonviolence he has held and how "no group of people, whether they number five or a hundred, has ever agreed on the definition" (p. 21). Gelderloos finds this "curious". I don't. He would without doubt get the same result if he held workshops on all of the above-mentioned phenomena. And not only that. Even several "things" are defined in a variety of ways. How about the difference between a journal, a magazine, and a newspaper? A ship, a boat, and a vessel? People can also end up discussing for hours whether chess is a sport, a game, or an elitist cultural marker, or whether corn flakes belong to the cereals family or constitute their own food group. Very

few terms, especially complex ones, are clearly defined. [5] If our answer to this problem is that these terms can't be used in any meaningful way in discussion, we might as well stop discussing. Yes, the term "violence" is often used in confusing, hypocritical, and nonsensical ways. However, the challenge lies in suggesting meaningful definitions that make meaningful discussion possible, rather than abandoning the debate.

2. Gelderloos seems to exaggerate the fact that "violence is so vague, so hard to define" (p. 25). Even if it is hard for a group of no more than five people to reach a definition that satisfies everyone (which, again, goes for any complex term), most of us share a very basic understanding of what the term "violence" implies – going beyond just "a certain emotional reality" (ibid.), which is the only one that Gelderloos seems to acknowledge. [6] When we say, for example, "Be careful when arguing with John, he can get violent", we pretty much all know what that means: if John doesn't like what we say, he might smash our nose in. When we speak of a less violent society, we speak of an end to domestic abuse, gun killings, fist fights at the county fair, and so forth. I think we also have a pretty common understanding of what it means to have violent parents, a violent partner, to grow up in a violent neighborhood, or to fall victim to a violent crime. [7] In fact, to tell people who've been in such situations that violence doesn't exist, can become somewhat cynical – although that is certainly far from Gelderloos's intentions.

3. Gelderloos's thrashing of the term "violence" appears a little odd given that the main interest in his book comes from his exploration of "nonviolence". I understand that Gelderloos doesn't see nonviolence as "an absence, avoidance, or transformation of violence" (p. 24). However, he also states that "perhaps the most important argument against nonviolence is that violence as a concept is ambiguous to the point of being incoherent" (p. 20). This clearly makes the meaning of nonviolence dependent on the meaning of violence, as it logically should be when you equip a noun with the prefix non. However, when you add the prefix non to a term that doesn't have any meaning, it (the meaning, that is) doesn't miraculously appear – rather, you will end up with yet another term that has none. So, if this is the case, what is Gelderloos actually writing about? ... Gelderloos explains that he sees nonviolence as "an attempt to resolve, transform, or suppress those things in our society and in our social movements that appear to its practitioners to be violent" (p. 24). That's a fair argument. Like the Catholic Church invented devil worshipers to get rid of unwanted deviants, the proponents of nonviolence invented violence so they can go after protestors they don't like. However, that still begs the question of why the term "violence", even in its negative form, attracts so much attention. It is hardly a coincidence that Gelderloos uses it in the title for his book. Gelderloos might answer along the following lines: "How was the category of 'violence' introduced in our strategic debates? I would argue that it was introduced by the very institution that serves as the gatekeeper to people's perception of violence: the media." (p. 26) I don't think so. The media didn't invent our fascination with violence. This fascination is rooted much deeper in human culture, and there is very little difference between the media and your radical housing project next door. Violence – also in the form of "nonviolence" – excites everybody, and

nonviolence pied Gene Sharp, Bob Geldof, or Chris Hedges, or stuck a flower up their nose or whatever it is they feel comfortable with doing? Why haven't they taken any actions against any of the police chiefs or mayors who have latched on to the language of nonviolence when it is politically convenient?

Gabriel, you say it's different in the scene that grew up around the German autonomous movement. If Sharp or Geldof get pied the next time they go to Mannheim or Innsbruck, I'll believe you, but honestly, I'm skeptical.

Yes, we need to carry out peaceful activities within our struggles, and we can benefit a great deal by having people of a peaceful disposition among us, doing their own thing or working with us directly, but do they need to frame that as non-violence? Absolutely not. Has anyone ever explained why it should be framed as nonviolence—as an exclusive practice—without engaging in historical whitewashing, falsification, oversimplification, or implicit criminalization of the so-called violent ones? Not that I've ever seen. So if we're dealing with a tendency that can't even justify itself in revolutionary terms without butchering history or strategy, why should we act like revolutionary nonviolence is a valid idea? Ball's in their court.

You are worried that by making harsh criticisms, I will not be able to "bridge the divide". Sometimes I share this concern and think that my approach is wrong. The thing is, I don't want to bridge the divide as it currently exists. My goal is not to simply establish communication between two camps. I want to challenge how everyone thinks about struggle, and to discredit nonviolence (without discrediting peaceful forms of struggle). I'm not going to talk about nonviolence as a "failure" or something that "protects the State" if I want to just build a bridge to it.

Also, I think you missed my metaphor about pissing in the stream. The piss in the stream is the snitching, the lying, the backstabbing, the opportunism, the careerism, the coziness with the elite. These things are many times more toxic than a harsh criticism. My point was, how can a proponent of nonviolence object to rudeness while staying mum about snitching? It's a good litmus test. Anyone who has such a reaction probably doesn't deserve our trust.

I respect the people who try to communicate such heavy criticisms politely, in a way that proponents of nonviolence will feel "happy" about, though I seriously wonder if they can do so without watering down the substance of those criticisms. However, I am closer to those who think it is best to just write off the proponents of nonviolence rather than debate them. Is there any use debating with a careerist or a snitch? What about debating with someone who maintains a convenient alliance with a careerist or a snitch? If I take on nonviolence, it is primarily to engage with those who are undecided, and to show anyone in the nonviolence crowd who sincerely believes in revolution that they are burning their bridges. It is not my responsibility to educate them about things that at this point should really be obvious. But in the face of such invective, maybe they will grasp the consequences of choosing such unscrupulous political bedfellows, and such dishonest ways of silencing other radicals. If the criticisms are deserved, and I think they are, then they should by no means feel good upon reading them. That's on them.

Discourses of unity are vital for the centralization of movements from the Color Revolutions to the UK student movement to the plaza occupation movement in Spain. It is used by the Greek Left to criminalize the anarchists, and it was also used by the Egyptian Left to silence radicals there. Unity features as part of the centralist control strategy in the work of Gene Sharp. Gabriel: can you deny this? If not, how can you claim that unity is something we need more of, without discussing any nuances or reservations?

Please, don't use any strawmen this time. Unity is not a synonym for debate and the building of relationships. The framework I am using to criticize you is the following: one in which people seek out relationships with others in struggle, communicate and debate especially with those who are different from them, but decide on a case by case basis whether to work together or to pursue their own line of attack. And when they work together, they embrace conflict and criticism as well as solidarity, rather than compromise and consensus. CrimethInc has put out texts on the recent struggles in Spain and Montreal, for example, that show the benefit of people taking a critical or autonomous approach, rather than waiting for some larger coalition to give them permission to act. I suspect that the model you will elaborate, if you go into more detail, has at least some similarities with that old classic, the leftist mass movement. I find that model thoroughly discredited.

False Dichotomies or Warranted Criticisms?

YOU SUM UP MY admittedly contradictory efforts to harshly criticize nonviolence and also open up the possibility for respectful solidarity with some of the people who currently use that framework. "It's a little like saying: 'All Americans suck – although some are really nice.'" It's the first part of the message that sticks, not the second." At no point in the book do I make a statement about "all" proponents of nonviolence. Therefore, a more accurate summation would be "Americans suck – although some are really nice." Well, if the shoe fits, know what I mean? And the thing is, most radicals from the US would agree with you. You would upset the patriotic Americans, but are the patriots really interested in changing what's wrong with the place?

When it comes to nonviolence, harsh criticisms are warranted. They are necessary. And they are deserved. Some people who believe in nonviolence avoid their philosophy's more ugly tendencies, and some of them are real comrades. But by continuing to use the framework of nonviolence, they are perpetuating its many problems, or at the least contributing to the confusion. Maybe if ten years ago, proponents of nonviolence had cleaned house and challenged all the racism, the authoritarianism, the reformism, the snitching, the backstabbing, the lying, the assault of other protesters, and all the other bullshit, we could talk about revolutionary nonviolence. Perhaps. But the ones who sincerely believe in nonviolent revolution have not done this. The best of them have made some quiet criticisms and then gone on ignoring all the problems, while the rest have accepted and even benefited from their marriage of convenience. They've continued sharing the same bed with snitches, racists, liars, and careerists. Why hasn't any advocate of

everybody will want to read about it. Gelderloos must be aware of that. In this sense, his statement, "I do not want to waste any more time by talking about violence" (p. 29), can only be meant tongue-in-cheek. He talks about violence on every page of his book.

II. Analysis: Where Does Social Change Come From?

THE FAILURE OF NONVIOLENCE INCLUDES an ambitious 50-page chapter on "The Revolutions of Today". It covers everything from the Oka Crisis and the Second Intifada to Occupy and the Syrian Civil War. The success of each "uprising", "movement", or "revolution" (Gelderloos makes no clear distinction between the terms here – probably because such distinctions are hard to make) is assessed according to four criteria: "1) whether a movement seized space for new social relations; 2) whether it spread an awareness of new ideas (and secondarily if this awareness was passive or whether it inspired others to fight); 3) whether it had elite support; 4) whether it achieved any concrete gains in improving people's lives." (p. 48)

Unsurprisingly, Gelderloos reaches the following conclusion: "...after a fair evaluation based on the readily available information, what becomes indisputable is that since the end of the Cold War, nonviolent movements have had their greatest successes in effecting regime change, helping to inaugurate new governments that subsequently disappoint and even betray those movements. They have not succeeded in redistributing power in any meaningful way, or putting revolutionary social relations into practice, despite claiming victory numerous times. On the other hand, heterogeneous movements using conflictive methods and a diversity of tactics have been the most effective at seizing space and putting new social relations into practice." (p. 90)

I'm not exactly sure what to make of this. Some of the criteria seem very general (for example, how exactly do you evaluate "concrete gains in improving people's lives"? and which section of society are we talking about?), and it appears difficult to apply them to all of these events for someone without first-hand experience (which Gelderloos can hardly have in every single case). In particular, though, I'm wondering if the distinction between "nonviolent movements" and "heterogeneous movements using conflictive methods and a diversity of tactics" can really be made that strictly. Unless a movement is really exclusively nonviolent (are there that many?), the nonviolent tactics are a part of the puzzle of a diversity of tactics, and the relevant question would then be which role they play in this patchwork and how they relate to other tactics. Gelderloos's point would be stronger if he said that his survey proved that nonviolent tactics never work, but that others do (which, of course, we'd then be curious to learn about in more detail). But to state that a "diversity of tactics" works better than the dogmatic use of one particular tactic is a bit of a no-brainer and puts us back to square one: Which tactics – or which combinations of tactics – are the most effective in a specific historical situation? [8]

I also think that it'd be worth looking closer at some historical developments that Gelderloos pays little attention to. A monumental event like the collapse of the Eastern European communist bloc in 1989-90 – which happened

largely without “combative” tactics (except for Romania, where this, arguably, did not contribute to a more radical development) – is basically ignored. Gelderloos contents himself with the observation that “citizens’ freedom of action did not at all increase” (p. 48) – a statement that I, as someone who grew up close to the iron curtain with family friends on the other side, find rather bold. The same applies to the following: “The line between democracy and dictatorship is fictitious. Whatever difference there is is primarily one of formalism and ritual.” (p. 106) Having Austrian grandparents who lived through the Third Reich, I would strongly deny that the difference between Austria in 1943 and Austria in 2013 is fictitious. In 2013, there are no concentration camps, there is no genocide of minority populations, and no one is executed for distributing leaflets either. I consider all of these differences beyond “formalism and ritual”. [9]

The fall of the iron curtain meant more than just a change of government; it meant the eradication of an apparently untouchable totalitarian political, economic, and social system. There is a tremendous lesson to be learned here for political activists. The decisive question thereby isn’t whether the changes led to something better or not. The decisive question is *how such changes were possible at all*. Yes, partly the system just imploded, eroded by its own contradictions. Yet, to simply leave it at that would be too naive an interpretation of history. Rather, we must investigate all of the “silent” and “invisible” forms of everyday resistance that contributed to this process – almost all of which fall outside of what most Western activists today would regard as “combative” tactics, or even “social movements”.

III. Strategy: What’s Next?

AS WE HAVE ALREADY SEEN, Gelderloos calls for a “diversity of tactics” (sometimes “methods”) in opposition to an approach of nonviolence. However, nonviolent activists are also for a diversity of methods, they just want them to be nonviolent. The difference to “combative” activists is not one of principle but one of drawing different boundaries. Any “diversity of tactics” approach that wants to be taken seriously must draw boundaries somewhere. I assume (and certainly hope) that no proponent of such an approach would consider it okay to bomb a kindergarten full of four-year-olds in order to take a stand against the state-run education system. However, once you admit that limits need to be drawn somewhere, the discussion is no longer about who draws them (proponents of nonviolence) and who doesn’t (“combative” folks), but *where* they need to be drawn. This means that you move from an ideological debate to a tactical one; from a place where abstract poles (“diversity of tactics” vs. “nonviolence”) inhibit fruitful discussion to a place where such a discussion becomes possible. In other words, “we”, the “combative” radicals, must not get stuck in discussions about whether it can be okay/beneficial/necessary to throw rocks at the police, to burn down an army recruitment center, or to prepare for armed struggle; instead, we must establish *when* it is okay/beneficial/necessary to do so. [10] This seems much more promising than to continue kicking a foe that is already on the ground. Gelderloos himself states that “Nonviolence Has Lost the Debate” – or, at least, that’s the title he gives the introduction to *The Failure of Nonviolence*.

of differing methods of struggle, but to eliminate all other methods. This aspiration is clear in Gene Sharp’s work, which in case you have not noticed, has become popular of late.

I really like your argument in point 6, that violence has to go in a liberated society, and that nonviolent activists provide an important moral compass. This is a fertile terrain for more discussion. It is another point where we have a substantial disagreement. I do not believe that violence has to go in a liberated society, nor do I believe that is even possible. Things that many people describe as violent now are an inherent part of society, I believe. I’m not talking about mass murder or rape—I would love to help create a world where those things never happened. But things like fights or feuds or the simple fact of death have been with us forever and I think they always will be. There are other things that many people classify as violent that I would defend and preserve. Things that I consider to be much more ethical than holding hands and singing songs. For one, fighting back against oppression.

I admire those societies that fought back against colonization. Some of them continue to fight back, whereas the peaceful ones have been assimilated or annihilated. That should be a lesson for all of us. When a group of people try to conquer, rape, and enslave—in a word, to rule—it is simply not an ethical or “moral” response to sing songs to them, to try to change their minds but refrain from striking them down.

These movements of ours are not going to result in a utopia, but even if they did, every Eden has its end. A living practice of self-defense is vital to any liberated society.

Point 7: false. I explicitly say we should not participate in tactics we disagree with ethically (p. 258) and give some indications of ethical consequences I find unacceptable.

8: Very true. I discuss this point in the present book and in the earlier book. But the category of “violence” again leads you into confusion. Violence, since it is not a thing but an ambiguous category, does not have a set psychological impact. Some forms of combative resistance can have a liberating effect on those who use them, and even on their targets. Frantz Fanon deals with this in depth.

9: This is funny. Some people criticized *How Nonviolence Protects the State* for talking too much about armed struggle (primarily in reference to the ‘60s and ‘70s) and now you criticize me for talking too much about riots in the new book. Well, riots and other street conflicts have been pretty relevant in the last few years, and I never once claim they will solve all our problems, quite the contrary. But from the Introduction, you should have known that an analysis of armed struggle movements 30 or more years ago falls outside the scope of this book. But I accept the criticism. The book would have been better if I had spoken more about other forms of attacking power that don’t rely on having a large group of people backing you up, especially since that’s not an everyday occurrence.

You object pretty strongly to my critique of unity. So, in the interest of real debate, I will respectfully throw down the following gauntlet: discourses of unity are commonly used by Trotskyists, NGOs, and all other sorts of authoritarians to portray their opponents as minorities and then silence those minorities.

on the beverage aisle: the flavor of the month will do.” I engage extensively in discussion about useful tactics, and more importantly about the ways such discussions can become more effective. If you really believe that I do so in such a superficial way that “the flavor of the month will do,” I would like you to say it explicitly and with evidence. Otherwise such a comparison only adds confusion to an already shaky argument.

Maybe you missed that discussion because I do not conclude in the way that I surmise you would have liked: this kind of tactic is okay, this kind of tactic is not. It is exactly that kind of conclusion I disagree with. For me, the problem is far more complex and circumstantial. One thing I think combative protesters need to avoid is hurting other protesters, for example by accidentally hitting them with rocks. The solution, though, is not to ban a certain tactic, but to do the thing well, and to be critical when it is done poorly. I explicitly favor this approach throughout the book.

Hitting fellow protestors with rocks has actually happened, so it’s a far more real problem than the emotionally charged hypothetical of bombing a kindergarten to protest institutional education, which is the unhelpful example you provide. In doing so you also ignore that I do in fact express disagreement with the calculated killing of bystanders (p. 258). However, I do not disagree in order to create a safe and stable place of moral certainty of the kind you seem to want; instead I immediately problematize it by discussing the inevitability of innocent deaths in a brutal, complex conflict like a war against occupation, as in Iraq. The point here? Any moral solid ground or unwavering compass points would be an illusion. Things aren’t that simple.

In your next point, you provide another misrepresentation. You quote: “‘Unity is a trojan horse for centralization and domination”, he writes (p. 280), while I wonder how we can make any substantial social change if we “simply ignore each other”. Even if it is difficult at times, I think that debate across differences of opinion and a willingness to cooperate across these differences, is essential for fundamental social change.” My quote is taken out of context. In fact I spend much more time than you do talking about the need to debate and work together. The difference is I do not believe we need to always work together, but that in certain situations ignoring others makes the most sense. Obligatory unity is not only authoritarian, it is also completely unrealistic. We can’t even possibly know all of the other people who are participating in a social struggle. How can we pretend to work with them? Only if we mistake a social struggle for a formal movement, full of named organizations that can be easily mapped or lumped into the same coalition.

I also provide specific historical examples of how authoritarians strategically use unity as a trojan horse to centralize movements but you choose not to respond to these examples, only to skew and twist. I suspect that in this case, it is not because you did a sloppy job of reading, but because we have a very substantive difference around the question of unity.

In your point 5, I believe you are again underestimating what nonviolence is setting out to do on a global scale: not to recognize the simultaneous existence

In the book’s final chapter, characteristically entitled “A Diversity of Methods”, Gelderloos does indeed engage in concrete discussions about the appropriateness of certain tactics under certain circumstances. This, to me, is the book’s most interesting part, and the following critical remarks will mostly relate to it.

1. Gelderloos sometimes presents slogans as arguments, falling short of further investigation. For example, he says that “nobody owns a protest” (p. 251). That is, without doubt, correct – morally, philosophically, legally. But what does it mean? That you can attend any protest and not give a shit about the organizers’ intentions? Do we need to grant someone the right of “ownership” to an event before we respect that someone might have a greater investment in it than we do? That would be a strange understanding of anarchism, it seems. [11] If I don’t like the organizers’ wishes or expectations, I don’t need to attend the event. I can join up with those who share my wishes and expectations, so we can organize our own. (Needless to say, the notion of a “mass protest” implies a variety of events.)

2. A similar problem arises with Gelderloos’s demands for “basic minimums” among different groups of protestors when “it is not possible for the different sides to simply ignore each other” (p. 281). He writes: “The peaceful ones should never aid the police in arresting or surveilling the combative ones, the combative ones should make sure never to do anything that physically harms the peaceful ones, and none of them should prevent the actions of the others.” (ibid.) This sounds great, but it’s not really an answer to anything, unless we clarify why physical harm is more important than other harm (“violence” obviously can’t be a criterion), at what point one prevents the actions of others, and so forth. [12] Most importantly, though, such basic minimums are way too wide to be strategically helpful. We need discussions about useful tactics, otherwise we select means of protest in the same way we select soft drinks on the beverage aisle: the flavor of the month will do.

3. Gelderloos might, of course, disagree with my call for discussions about strategy. He states that “strategy as a path to a set destination [is] a view I increasingly disagree with” (p. 287). To be honest, I’m not exactly sure which kinds of strategy Gelderloos does agree with, since developing a strategy seems dependent on having a goal, but that’s besides the point. What’s important is to coordinate our actions in a way that makes them effective on a broad scale.

4. Even this, however, might go too far for Gelderloos. “Unity is a trojan horse for centralization and domination”, he writes (p. 280), while I wonder how we can make any substantial social change if we “simply ignore each other”. Even if it is difficult at times, I think that debate across differences of opinion and a willingness to cooperate across these differences, is essential for fundamental social change. To defiantly respond to differences of opinion with, “Okay, you have yours and I have mine”, or, “Do what you want, just don’t get in my way”, is liberating only in a crass individualistic sense. It is also reminiscent of a protestant *Gewissensethik*, an “ethics of conscience”, where we can all feel good about ourselves, while the wider social picture disappears or remains something we only pay lip service to. In other words, our self-image becomes more important than revolutionary consciousness. To me, this is one of the biggest problems in activist culture today. Yes, there are

sites of resistance everywhere, but their ability to really challenge the state and capital have so far proven minimal. And one reason is that there is too little, not too much unity. Gelderloos writes: "Any practice that attempts to impose homogeneity in the name of unity violates the sense of solidarity and mutual respect necessary for diverse currents of struggle to coexist." (p. 281) I would reformulate thus: "Solidarity and mutual respect come to life in any serious attempt to create unity in diverse currents of struggle without imposing homogeneity."

5. Here is how Gelderloos explains the notion of "diversity of tactics": "At its most basic, the concept of a diversity of tactics is nothing more than the recognition that different methods of struggle exist side by side." (p. 18) That's a fine recognition. Yet, who would deny that? If the proponents of nonviolence did, they wouldn't criticize other methods of struggle – they would simply ignore them. What is at stake is not only to recognize the existence of different methods of struggle, but to collectively assess which of these methods we want to use and combine.

6. This process obviously requires widespread discussion, but widespread discussion only works if all participants and their views are taken seriously. But is there anything that the proponents of nonviolence have to tell "us", the "combative" activists? I believe so. Nonviolent activists remind us that in a liberated society – that is, according to my understanding, a society in which individuals can develop freely on the basis of social justice – it is not just authority, hierarchy, patriarchy, or racism that have to go, but also violence (and, as I explained above, I do think that violence exists). This means that nonviolent activists provide an important moral compass for our actions, and it also means that they have an ethical advantage in our discussions on tactics. "Combative" activists might have a strategic (and perhaps aesthetic) problem with people holding hands and singing folk songs against the war, but these people are hardly doing anything that in itself violates our vision of a liberated world (save perhaps some of those songs). Injuring or killing someone, however, does, which is why actions that might imply such consequences require a proper explanation for why we accept to engage in them nonetheless. So, when Gelderloos writes, "It does not matter in the least which ... activities are 'violent' or 'nonviolent'" (p. 242), he is right in that the categorization does not matter, but it does matter whether we are talking about wanting to form a picket line or to kneecap someone. These actions have different ethical implications that require different forms of explanation.

7. If we are not willing to differentiate between different forms of actions according to their ethical implications, the danger of trivializing violence is always looming. There are some semantic mirror images of Gelderloos's contention that "Violence doesn't exist" that are popular in radical circles as one-size-fits-all justifications for "combative" action, such as "Violence is everywhere" or "We live in a violent society". In the worst case, such credos can be pretty scary.

8. There is also a danger of underestimating the psychological impact of certain "combative" methods. This, for example, is an element I would add to Gelderloos's criteria for evaluating the effects of social movements. The use of methods that do physical harm to people, spread fear, and intensify an already existing situation of social insecurity and hostility – no matter how justified and necessary they are,

that goes on for pages. If you had carefully read the chapter, you would not infer "that you can attend any protest and not give a shit about the organizers' intentions". All of the doubts you raise are addressed in the book itself. It makes for a boring debate indeed if one person has to constantly repeat themselves in the face of blatant misrepresentations, quotes presented out of context, and misunderstandings.

As I move on to your second point, I find another point of difference. I suggest minimum agreements (like not snitching) not to clarify things and end debate, but to encourage debate. Gabriel seems to have a legalistic mind ("it's not really an answer to anything, unless we clarify..."). The way you talk about drawing a line of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors resembles the logic of a legal code. The point of a legal code is to be obeyed, which is why it must be clear, and not open to anybody's interpretation. My purposes are completely at odds with those of a legal code. I don't want a clear code of conduct, not in a protest, not for my life, and not for the struggles I participate in.

I personally want to extend the idea as far as possible that talking to the cops is wrong, but as an ethic we discuss, not as a new law. For example, say someone talks to the cops to get a restraining order against an abusive partner. If we want a clear boundary, then we would have to punish (errr, sorry, "hold accountable") this person for violating the rule (ahem, "agreement?") against talking to cops, same as any old snitch. The only way out would be to amend the law and add articles of cases when it is acceptable to talk to the cops. But what if the person in question actually had access to a solid community that would support them and help them keep away their ex, but instead they brought in the law as a vindictive attack? Now the amendment needs an amendment.

If anarchists have to be lawyers, we are doing something horribly wrong. Reality is way too complex to be able to come up with a clear set of boundaries, in abstract and in advance, to give clarity to every eventuality. I want to say this loud and clear: the legalistic project is a pathological endeavor. The obsession with some perfected framework, some final state, an end to the debate, is a statist neurosis. It is no surprise that someone who grows up in this society would have such a neurosis, but it is one an anarchist would do well to root out.

I am firmly against talking to cops. But I have had friends who have gotten restraining orders, and I stand by them. Is this hypocrisy? No. It is a recognition of the complexity of real life. It is also an approach that encourages more debate and discussion on a case by case basis, because every situation is different. In the example I cite, we've had to debate whether we as anarchists were doing enough to support our friends and make the police obsolete, and whether our friends really didn't have any better options, and why. We can't have a clear list of bylaws that tells us what is right and what is wrong. It makes far more sense to improve our communication, hone our ability to debate, ponder sensible ethics, and discuss responses to specific situations. It must be a never-ending process. That's what collective decision-making is all about.

Gabriel, your closing sentence to this point demonstrates the flippancy with which you misrepresent my arguments. "We need discussions about useful tactics, otherwise we select means of protest in the same way we select soft drinks

What about your example of Austria? Without a doubt, most people in Austria today have it better than they did in the '30s and '40s. But can't that have something to do with the changing place of Austrian society in relation to world capitalism and world governance? Remember that I'm using a global analysis. While it is an easy tendency to react to such a crass, extreme statement as my own (that the difference between democracy and dictatorship is formalistic) by resorting to personal stories of tragedy and anguish, how useful is this in coming up with a clear analysis?

Am I dealing with the welfare of the Austrian people in my book, or am I looking at the effects of democracy on a world scale? Clearly I'm doing the latter. As I already point out in the book, in democratic countries around the world, we can find slavery, genocide, and the worst forms of misery. Okay: people in Austria are no longer under the knife. That is no reason to give democracy a free pass. The knife has moved elsewhere, and make no mistake: it is bigger.

One of democracy's strengths as a system of social control is its ability to successfully evade criticism or an accurate understanding of its nature. You're right that I made my argument in a way that does not pay respect to the very real differences and improvements that specific societies have experienced. But my central argument remains valid, and there is a strategic reason for making it.

Drawing the Lines

IN YOUR NEXT SECTION, you ask where we draw the line when we decide what tactics are acceptable and necessary. Then you offer some criticisms of how I deal with this question (in Chapter 10). To start with, I want to clarify that my intent is not to draw the line, but to offer suggestions on how people using different methods can interact in common spaces or debate about what forms of participation are acceptable and effective. Giving people an answer is less helpful and less realistic than suggesting how people can find that answer for themselves, especially when it comes to something that must be constantly decided and reinvented, like acceptable participation in a social struggle. I think it would be worse than useless to create and advocate a framework that measures when certain kinds of action should be allowed. Rather than trying to impose a new set of rules, it makes more sense to accept the inevitability of other people in a social movement doing things we strongly disagree with, and strategize about how to respond in such cases. This is a central question of organization and interaction in a decentralized, multi-cephalous struggle that has no ruling group or structures of governance.

Your criticisms of chapter 10 start with the following: "Gelderloos sometimes presents slogans as arguments, falling short of further investigation. For example, he says that "nobody owns a protest" (p. 251). That is, without doubt, correct – morally, philosophically, legally. But what does it mean? That you can attend any protest and not give a shit about the organizers' intentions?"

This is the only answer you suggest, and it is false, through and through. Anyone with any doubts need only go to the page you cite. I do not use the phrase, "nobody owns a protest" as a slogan, but as one articulation in a chain of arguments

and no matter whether we call them "violent" or "combative" or something else – rarely leave people unaffected: the perpetrators, the victims, and everyone in-between. Yes, billions of people are subjected to structural violence every day. But if you're engaged in physical confrontation every day, if you must wonder whether you make it back alive every time you leave the house, if arrest is a constant concern, it will wear you and your community down in particularly gruesome ways. Again, under certain circumstances paying this price might be inevitable and necessary to make life for you and your community better in the long run. But it's nothing that can ever be taken lightheartedly. And it's crucial to reflect on all possibilities to avoid such situations. [13]

9. Finally, there is an aspect to Gelderloos's writings about "combative" forms of resistance, which I find curious: he writes almost exclusively about riots and black blocs. To me, this is far from the most interesting part of discussing "non-nonviolent" approaches to protest. Admittedly, I don't really understand the excitement on either side. The moral outrage these activities cause among politicians, the media, and dogmatic nonviolent types is laughable. On any given Saturday night, there was more property damage, unruly behavior, and fighting with cops in the Tyrolean beer tents I frequented as a youth than there is in most black bloc protests. Plus, who really cares about a window at McDonald's? Yet, that's exactly why the political ramifications of such acts must not be overrated either. Riots serve many purposes: they empower people, they vent anger, they make problems obvious, they can temporarily turn power relations upside down, they politicize, they inspire, all of that. Yet, there is a difference between strongly sympathizing with Rancid singing, "I'm a kid who's got a lot of problems – if I throw a brick maybe the brick will go and solve them" ("I Wanna Riot"), and believing that this might actually be true. The brick might cure some of the problems' symptoms (which is great), but it's not gonna eradicate the root. In order for this to happen, we need to achieve radical social change; and to achieve radical social change we need tactics that do more than "fuck shit up". In other words, I think we need in-depth evaluations of ALF and ELF tactics used in the 1990s and early 2000s, reflections on the complex of imperialism, liberation struggle, and guerrilla warfare, and discussions on armed struggle in the metropolis, rather than more black bloc debates and defenses of riots. This would give our discussions of "combative" forms of resistance a different dimension.

Beyond Dichotomies

GELDERLOOS LAMENTS THAT "direct debate between the idea of nonviolence and that of a diversity of tactics has become increasingly rare" (p. 14). He hopes that "we can develop a more solidaristic communication on both sides" (p. 285). He also speaks of a need to "support one another's forms of participation in the struggle" (p. 265). Finally, he makes it clear that "my aim with this book is not to convert or delegitimize every person who prefers nonviolence" (p. 19). This is all very honorable. Yet, what is his contribution to making it possible?

It is clear for Gelderloos who the good guys and who the bad guys are in the (non)violence debate: "Over and over again, nonviolence proponents put all

their emphasis on an authoritarian insistence everyone adopt their form of protest, often devoid of any content. Even in the heart of nonviolent movements, one is often hard-pressed to find any real articulation of a critique against exploitation, domination, or the power structures that create these problems. Those who support a diversity of tactics, on the other hand, tend to remain on point, with no alienation between their ideas and methods, attacking capitalism in their discourse as well as in moments of protest and action.” (p. 138) It is the nonviolent activists who “have injected an implicit hierarchy into the conversation that arises when two different moods of action conflict” (p. 267); it is them who “have created the exact sort of polemical environment that ‘nonviolent communication’ tries to avoid, in which two sides close ranks and face off” (p. 30). With verbal broadsides like this, it doesn’t make much of a difference if Gelderloos every now and again provides some band-aids by conceding that “people who personally favor peaceful tactics, and even those whose concept of revolution is to work for peace, who follow a philosophy of doing no harm, should be respected as part of the struggle” (p. 241). [14] It’s a little like saying: “All Americans suck – although some are really nice.” It’s the first part of the message that sticks, not the second.

When it comes to judging the political record of nonviolent activists, Gelderloos pulls no punches either: “Nonviolence has failed on a global level. It has proven to be a great friend to governments, political parties, police departments, and NGOs, and a traitor to our struggles for freedom, dignity, and well-being. The vast majority of its proponents have jumped ship to cozy up to the media, the State, or wealthy benefactors, using any cheap trick, manipulation, or form of violence (like attacking fellow protesters or helping the cops carry out arrests) that comes in handy to win the contest, even if it means the division and death of the movement. Many have proven themselves to be opportunists, politicians, or careerists. And a principled minority who actually have remained true to their historical movements still have not answered for past failings or current weaknesses.” (p. 18) Or: “At best, nonviolence can oblige power to change its masks, to put a new political party on the throne and possibly expand the social sectors that are represented in the elite, without changing the fundamental fact that there is an elite that rules and benefits from the exploitation of everybody else. And if we look at all the major rebellions of the last two decades, since the end of the Cold War, it seems that nonviolence can only effect this cosmetic change if it has the support of a broad part of the elite—usually the media, the wealthy, and at least a part of the military, because nonviolent resistance has never been able to resist the full force of the State. When dissidents do not have this elite support, strict nonviolence seems like the surest way to kill a movement...” (p. 11) [15]

Gelderloos wants others to “sympathize with the reasons why many of us are angry about this topic” (p. 285). The reasons being, as I understand them, the treacherous attitudes of nonviolent activists. Okay. But how does he expect nonviolent activists – treacherous or not – to feel after reading paragraphs such as the above? Happy? [16]

In his “Comments on *How Nonviolence Protects the State*”, Gelderloos addresses concerns about the tone of his critique as follows: “I find it essential to

very fundamental change, but you only enter into it briefly.

I’ll defend my argument as best I can, even though I don’t fully understand yours. Part of my family is Russian. Although they certainly appreciate some of the changes brought about by democracy (though, to be fair, many of these changes actually date to *glasnost* and *perestroika*), they unanimously say that life was better under the Soviet Union. If you believe in statistics, the majority tends to hold the same opinion. This has even been the case, in at least a few polls, in former East Germany.

What about the non-formal differences, like being able to distribute pamphlets? At this point you’ve shifted the frame of reference from the Soviet Union to Nazi Austria, but the question is still valid, as people also got in trouble for handing out pamphlets in the Soviet Union, though much less frequently in its latter decades. Without hyperbole, how many ex-bloc countries can we reasonably characterize as no better off than before? Belarus, Romania, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Bulgaria, at the least, wouldn’t you agree? These are still basically police states in the classic sense. And Russia is a toss-up. As for Uzbekistan, I am reasonably sure there have been more political killings and torture there in the two decades after the transition than in the two decades before. So, by claiming an absolute difference between dictatorship and democracy, aren’t we just reinforcing the democratic mythology that covers up such abuses much more effectively than any dictatorship ever did? Any time a democracy does the same things as a dictatorship, its defenders simply say, “But that isn’t a real democracy.” I could make the same argument in defense of dictatorships, and fairly too, since according to a central ideology they commonly hold, dictatorships are based on social harmony and protecting society from outside destabilizing elements. If a system directs violence against its own people, it must not be a true dictatorship.

If you read the more thorough explanations of my analysis of democracy (Chapters 5 and 6), I think you’ll get where I’m coming from. When I talk about freedom of action, I’m not talking about the common list of things like free speech or the ability to buy what we want and travel where we want, provided we have the money. I’m talking about the self-organization of our own lives. I think that with the advance of capitalism, people have less control over their own lives, at least in many aspects, than they did under the Soviet Union. The former simply did not have the power to intervene in daily life to the extent that capitalist democracies 20 years later do. Yes, it was a monstrous and intrusive bureaucracy, but a large part of the difference is that it was more heavy handed, not that it was more controlling.

Is “free speech” just a formalistic change? That depends. Without a doubt, it’s nice to be able to complain. But one of the innovations of democracy is its ability to harness our expression for its own maintenance. In this context, “formalistic” does not mean insubstantial. It means that the forms used for the reproduction of power have changed, and under democracy, “free speech” along with elections and a shifting conception of freedom are some of the new forms that uphold our domination. Most of the speech that is supposedly free is actually a form of participation in the reproduction of power.

there, although I would also warn that if another mass movement appears there, it may well be nonviolent beyond your wildest nightmares (as I discuss in the book, struggles in Spain have historically been combative and accepted a diversity of tactics at the very least, but due to the nature of the Spectacle the mass movements that appeared here in 2011 were extremely nonviolent in their beginnings).

In the US, the UK, and many other places, nonviolence has been based on reversing what should be a no-brainer. Nonviolence here means denying the legitimacy and effectiveness of other forms of struggle, denouncing a diversity of tactics, and even erasing the histories of struggles that were not pacifist. Both this book and the earlier one are full of such examples. (Did you not notice?!) And this is also true of nonviolence on an international scale. The Color Revolutions around the world are based on a model of exclusive nonviolence, and Gene Sharp emphasizes the need for such exclusivity in his writing. You would know that if you had read my book more carefully.

But maybe you do realize that, and choose instead to focus on the more important question of which tactics are “the most effective in a specific historical situation?” You’re right. Diversity of tactics is a no-brainer, and it’s not enough. We need to go farther, and I argue as much in Chapter 10. But it’s not fair to suggest that I don’t explore this question. It should be common sense that you don’t look to a survey, an overview, for detailed discussion of tactics and strategy. I take on specific cases, in detail, to talk about the limits of nonviolence in Chapters 5 and 6, and some of the accomplishments of combative activities, specifically riots and black blocs, in Chapter 7. Chapter 9, moreover, is dedicated to effectiveness of conflictive methods, specifically examining complementary relationships between peaceful and forceful forms of participation.

Is it possible that you were able to write your review so quickly because you didn’t get to Chapter 9? I’m joking, of course, but hopefully you see where I’m going with this. It doesn’t make for a good debate if we can’t cover new ground.

And speaking of having to go back over the same ground, it’s not true that I “pay little attention” to the collapse of the Eastern European communist bloc (try Chapter 8, pp. 206-209). I just don’t talk about it in my survey in Chapter 3, because that chapter deals with occurrences after the end of the Cold War. You describe this collapse as being free of combative tactics. I see you’ve chosen to ignore my discussion of the movement in East Germany, which included riots and street fighting. Perhaps a more important debate is whether this movement led to the collapse of the Soviet Bloc. I think a more important factor was that the Soviet elite saw they could increase their power and wealth by transitioning to democracy. This was also the fate of the last fascist countries in Europe. Social rebellions played an important role, but in the end the elite was never overthrown. They stayed in power, and increased their power. So aren’t we doing ourselves a disservice by talking about revolution?

I think your bigger beef is with my characterization of the change that took place with the end of the Soviet Union. I say it was overwhelmingly a formalistic change. I accept that this can come off as crass, hyperbolic, and just plain wrong. I think you could make an interesting argument for how this constituted a

avoid an academic politeness in these debates, as though we were talking about abstract concepts and not matters of life and death. I think that in the face of hypocrisy, manipulation, lies, collaboration with the authorities, and cowardice dressed up as sophistication, outrage is not only permissible, it is necessary.” (p. 285) The “matters of life and death” part might be a touch over-dramatic when mainly discussing black blocs (especially when calling the difference between dictatorship and democracy “fictitious” at the same time), but that has no relevance for the argument itself. Perhaps it really is necessary to be this outspoken when tackling the issue. Still, the question remains: Can this, in any way, help us bridge divides? I have my doubts. I rather believe that it will reinforce them.

In the “Comments on *How Nonviolence Protects the State*”, Gelderloos characterizes people who have expressed general agreement with the book’s points but discomfort with the way they were presented as folks who “wanted to piss in the stream and drink from it too” (p. 285). How about: No one pisses in the stream and we all drink from it?

Conclusion

PETER GELDERLOOS ESSENTIALLY says two things: 1. Nonviolent resistance is not effective. 2. Nonviolent activists (all or many or some – as stated in the beginning, this is not entirely clear) are dogmatic. Let’s say, for the sake of the argument, that Gelderloos is correct on both counts. But then what? In fact, Gelderloos himself points the way: “We need to develop a collective intelligence about when is the right moment to attack, when is the right moment to hold our ground, when to shout and make noise, and when merely to be present. Sometimes we must take to the streets to celebrate, other times to mourn. Sometimes to attack and destroy, other times dance, or occupy, or break the asphalt and plant a garden.” (p. 267) I hope that these are the exact questions he will tackle in his next book, with the same eagerness and thoroughness he has mustered to save us from the threat of nonviolence. [17]

No one with the slightest interest in revolutionary activism and the “violence vs. nonviolence” debate will regret reading *The Failure of Nonviolence*. Whether it helps you confirm your “combative” beliefs and practices or challenges you to defend and sharpen your “nonviolent” ones, you will not make it through the text without wanting to gather your friends and comrades for long, long hours of discussions. Again and again. Guaranteed. What more could you want from a book?

Gabriel Kuhn

(August 2013)

Notes

[1] The book was self-published in 2005. An expanded version was published by South End Press in 2007.

[2] Gelderloos has left the term “activism” behind, because it “was an ugly term, and it is a fitting label for a defunct practice” (p. 293). I will still use it in this review as a shorthand. (In fact, despite his reservations, Gelderloos frequently uses the

term “activists” in his book as well.)

[3] There is a sense in Gelderloos’s book that I often encounter in “combative” circles, namely, that every time someone interferes with “combative” actions during a protest, it is a case of peace policing. I think that interpretation is not entirely justified. I have witnessed interferences that had nothing to do with anyone peace policing (let alone unmasking other protestors or handing them over to the police), only with other “combative” protestors – often rightfully, in my opinion – believing that a certain charge was, right there and then, irresponsible, self-defeating, or dangerous.

[4] Speaking from my own experience, the worst that might happen is that a non-violent anarchist publisher hesitates to publish one of your pieces because you are deemed a “black bloc anarchist”. Yet, I think that’s hardly anything to get worked up about – the label is kind of amusing, it is in some way applicable, and there are plenty of other publishers.

[5] Gelderloos continues his critique of the term “violence” by writing: “It [violence] is a category, a human construct in which we choose to place a wide array of actions, phenomena, situations, and so forth.” (p. 20) But this is the very definition of what terms are – they are all human constructs in which we place all sorts of things (and non-things). I might also add that I think Gelderloos fails in replacing the term “violence” with supposedly less vague and incoherent terms. He writes: “If I have to refer to a body of methods or tactics that are usually excluded by nonviolence, I will talk about ‘illegal’, ‘combative’, ‘conflictive’, or ‘forceful’ actions, as the case may be.” (p. 29) “Illegal” is certainly not incoherent, but it is a good choice? Many nonviolent activists I know do illegal things all the time. And can’t a blockade be “conflictive”? The burning of a draft card “combative”? And what exactly is a “forceful” method or tactic?

[6] Interestingly enough, Gelderloos writes the following with respect to the term “revolution”: “Even though revolution is a term with many definitions, it is informed by experiences of the struggle we often share. This vague commonality, the fact that we are on some level struggling together even though our reasons and concepts differ, is why we can criticize one another’s concept of revolution without necessarily agreeing on what revolution means: because concepts inform practices, and practices meet with different results when they are put to use in the streets. ... This, in my mind, is the complicated, suspended nature of reality, often lacking any objective coordinates but still full of pressing needs and imminent truths.” (p. 33) I’m not exactly sure why this very logic wouldn’t apply to the term “violence” as well.

[7] Gelderloos himself makes repeated use of the colloquial consensus on what violence is, for example when he repeatedly speaks of “police violence”, when he entitles a chapter “How the peaceful can benefit from violence”, or when he explains: “Even those who believe they do not like violence benefit from the more dynamic space that is created when a diversity of tactics is at play” (p. 278). All of these usages of the term only make sense because such a consensus exists.

[8] Another word on Gelderloos’s claim that an exclusive use of “non-combative” methods only leads to superficial and cosmetic change: At one point, he writes

uprisings using quantitative and reductionist methods that simplify and hide the actual histories, whereas others like Rebecca Solnit refer to an unnamed historical record that supposedly speaks for itself, and given that in *How Nonviolence Protects the State* I already dismantled the lies about supposed nonviolent victories in the legendary social movements (all of which occurred before the end of the Cold War, in a very different geopolitical context), I believe it is useful to survey recent uprisings in a way that does not provide handy reductionist statistics nor a deep understanding of each and every history, but that can provide a basic overview or a feeling for the patterns at work.

I already acknowledged that such a survey is inevitably flawed, but also useful. If we keep the flaws in mind, we can minimize them while making better use of what the survey can provide. You allude to the flaws—nothing new there to debate—but do not name a single instance in which you disagree with my interpretation of one of the histories being surveyed. And unlike the nonviolent statisticians, I made my interpretations explicitly. So really all you’re doing is repeating what I already wrote, but framing it as a criticism of my work. What’s the sense in that? The benefit about the survey I provide is that all the interpretations are transparent. Anyone who wants to dispute the patterns I describe (rather than just suggest they are preconceived, as you do without a shred of evidence) can challenge the interpretations. “The UK student movement actually did put new social relations into practice,” for example, or “such and such movement was actually violent”.

The qualm that you instead choose to elaborate on is the following:

“I’m wondering if the distinction between “nonviolent movements” and “heterogeneous movements using conflictive methods and a diversity of tactics” can really be made that strictly. Unless a movement is really exclusively non-violent (are there that many?), the nonviolent tactics are a part of the puzzle of a diversity of tactics, and the relevant question would then be which role they play in this patchwork and how they relate to other tactics. Gelderloos’s point would be stronger if he said that his survey proved that nonviolent tactics never work, but that others do (which, of course, we’d then be curious to learn about in more detail). But to state that a “diversity of tactics” works better than the dogmatic use of one particular tactic is a bit of a no-brainer and puts us back to square one: Which tactics – or which combinations of tactics – are the most effective in a specific historical situation?”

Here, we agree on everything except the framing. Someone in an anarchistnews comment already made this point, and it’s worth repeating. It really should be a “no-brainer” that “a “diversity of tactics” works better than the dogmatic use of one particular tactic” (to be more precise, I would say a strict set of tactics, because nonviolence includes more than just one tactic). Oh dear God how I wish I lived in a world where that were a no-brainer for everyone. But Gabriel we don’t live in that world. Maybe it’s an accepted fact in German-speaking countries, in which case I salute the collective intelligence of the social movements

admission that you are wrong on this point.

In your final argument on terminology, Gabriel, you use a bit of misdirection. I had argued that violence as a strategic criterion was introduced into our debates by the State and the elite media, and I give historical examples. You respond by saying “I don’t think so. The media didn’t invent our fascination with violence.” That’s a non sequitur, as I was not discussing fascination with violence, but strategic emphasis on it. “Violence – also in the form of “nonviolence” – excites everybody, and everybody will want to read about it.” Really? What about invisible, structural forms of violence? Who finds that exciting? By using the term “violence” uncritically, you fall into exactly the sort of confusion—and ultimately meaninglessness—that I warn against. Another reason for not using the category “violence” (except to critique it).

This is what I mean when I say that I don’t want to waste time talking about violence, which should be contextually clear. You claim I contradict myself, saying “He talks about violence on every page of his book.” You are wrong. There are very few pages of the book, after the first chapter, when I talk about violence. Nearly every time that I write the word, it is in reference to something the media or nonviolence proponents would classify as “violent.” I mention the term only to criticize its use, which is consistent with my argument. Going back to the beginning, it seems you have misunderstood that entire argument. I do not claim that violence is “not a thing” to make it disappear and not talk about it, but rather so that I can critique it as a category, and one that is uniquely ambiguous and counterproductive. All of the confusion that you have run aground of in this section by trying to defend the category only reinforces my arguments, I think.

And to close the topic of terminology, in a footnote you point out that I disavow the term “activists” but “despite his reservations” uses the term “frequently”. Again, you have misunderstood. I disavowed the use of the term “activists” in a very specific context: the label I was going to use to describe the opponents of nonviolence. I stick to that rejection. If you were to read more closely, you would notice that I use the term “activists” for those who describe themselves as such, primarily in the case of nonviolent activists. I’m not going to tell anyone not to label themselves that way. I also think that “nonviolence” is a nonsensical term but I’ll still call someone a proponent of nonviolence if that is how they identify.

I think one condition for a good debate is that one should not have to repeat entire arguments and I wish you had read this chapter more carefully and responded to what I actually wrote.

Yes, Where Does Social Change Come From?

IN THE NEXT SECTION OF YOUR REVIEW, you take on the admittedly ambitious Chapter 3, which attempts to survey all the major social rebellions since the end of the Cold War that I could come across. I admit in the book itself that I could not possibly be aware of every uprising, and that my evaluations were neither flawless nor objective. But they were transparent. Given that some proponents of nonviolence have made statistical surveys of the supposed effects of violence in global

that “the greatest victory a nonviolent movement has ever achieved in the history of the world [was to replace] one government with another” (p. 34). But can any “combative” movement claim anything different?

[9] In the context of his critique of democracy, Gelderloos also criticizes democratic forms of decision-making: “All forms of unitary decision-making, whether democratic or autocratic, are designed to force people to abide by decisions they disagree with.” (p. 250) We encounter this argument regularly in the most radical of our circles. One crucial thing always seems to be forgotten, however: If I agree that I will sometimes abide by decisions I disagree with because I deem this beneficial to a healthy and balanced community life in the long run, I do not experience being outvoted as a quasi-fascist attack on my precious personal freedom. It is the possibility to agree to the rules of the game that distinguishes democratic (and by this I do not mean parliamentary) ways of decision-making from autocratic ones.

[10] A guideline for this approach might come from members of Denmark’s Blekingegade Group, who, in the 1970s and 1980s, robbed cash-in-transit trucks, post offices, and warehouses in order to provide liberation movements in the Third World with material means. Reflecting on their actions in a piece published in 2009, three former members write: “If the motto of the end justifying the means implies that you can use any means you want (without any consideration for the consequences for others) in order to achieve any end you have decided to pursue, then the Blekingegade Group has never followed such a motto. At the same time, we have never followed the motto that the end never justifies the means either. After all, there is a third option – which, in fact, is much more realistic than the other two: not all ends justify all means, but, depending on the circumstances, some ends justify some means.” (Niels Jørgensen, Torkil Lauesen, and Jan Weimann, “Det handler om politik”, *Social Kritik*, no. 117, March 2009, online at <http://snylterstaten.dk/efterspil/det-handler-om-politik.html>, translation GK)

[11] Apparently, Gelderloos doesn’t disagree. He writes at one point: “Someone who goes to a candlelight vigil with fireworks clearly has either misunderstood the historical character of this tradition, or they are intentionally trying to disrespect those who are organizing it.” (p. 273) I’m not sure why he doesn’t extend this principle to other events.

[12] We encounter similar problems with sentences like the following: “People who make different choices do not ruin common spaces of protest. The criterion of importance is whether one’s actions harm another participant in that space.” (p. 268) Or: “...mutual criticism and support [are] only possible if those who today separate themselves as pacifists decide unequivocally to stand always with those who struggle, and always against the powers that oppress” (p. 19). Defining “harming someone”, “those who struggle”, and “the powers that oppress” is at least as complicated as defining violence, a task Gelderloos deems pointless. Yet, it is obvious that these phrases need further clarification in order to really mean anything – such clarifications, of course, can only come from collective debate.

[13] That I’m not the only one supporting “combative” tactics who is experiencing this is proven by important pieces such as “*After We have Burnt Everything*” – a

text, which, unfortunately, Gelderloos only mentions in passing.

[14] Another example is the following: “By placing more importance on some of them than on others, those who fetishize illegal and combative tactics miss out on the richness of struggle, and the ways by which struggles regenerate. They reproduce the dynamic in which pacifists isolate themselves and seek some discourse to justify their own superiority, as opposites always recreate each other.” (p. 242) This sounds reconciling. Yet twenty pages later, any such sense is wiped away by the following comparison: “There are a number of errors that people who use combative or dangerous tactics can commit that damage mutual respect or solidarity. – On the other side of the line, there are a great many things that peaceful protesters do that are an absolute breach of respect and solidarity.” (p. 252/261, my emphases)

[15] Some of Gelderloos’s critiques of nonviolent activists backfire. For example, he suggests that NGOs “flock to protests where there will obviously be riots so they can subsequently monopolize the media attention that follows – since they are incapable of doing anything interesting enough to generate attention on their own” (p. 278-279). When did media attention become the ultimate measuring stick for doing something interesting? Is this the same media that, according to Gelderloos, spreads “the typical clichés of nonviolence” (p. 148) and must be “abolished” (p. 175)? I’m at a loss here. The relationship between anarchists and the media is tricky. Perhaps that’s why unsettling truths sometimes fall under the table. With respect to the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle, Gelderloos, crediting the “combative” tactics being employed, writes that they “did more to spread an awareness of the antiglobalization movement than any other summit protest in North America or Europe” (p. 94). Yet, this is only half the truth. The other half is that no other summit protest – “combative” or not – has received that kind of media attention.

[16] Here, I would like to return once more to having a different framework of experience. Gelderloos writes: “What if those who favor combative tactics started denouncing peaceful protesters for ‘ruining our riot’? What if we tried to make people feel uncomfortable, unwelcome, or even criminal if they showed up to ‘our’ protest and did not also pick up a rock or a can of spraypaint? The fact that this has never happened shows that we are not dealing with a symmetrical conflict between two conflicting sides. On the contrary, those who favor nonviolence have often based their very practice on a total lack of respect for others and an attempt to dominate an entire movement.” (p. 267-268) Hmm. To begin with, Gelderloos’s entire book feels like a complaint about how nonviolent protestors ruin our riots. More importantly, though, this passage suggests that there is no contempt for peaceful protestors in the “combative” protestors’ ranks. Is that true? I can think of numerous derogatory terms used for protestors not willing to engage in “combative” demonstrations in the circles I’ve moved in for the past twenty-five years – “liberal”, “coward”, and “hippie” are among the most harmless. To give another example: Whenever I attend talks by people advocating “combative” tactics in front of a home audience, a simple reference to “the folks with the signs” and a suggestive smirk always gets the crowd roaring. My point is: Does it really add to the credibility of our position if we blame the “opposite side” for everything that’s

but not very. It certainly is not combative. As for “forceful”, it is an action that uses force. Breaking open a door is forceful. Asking someone to open it for you is not. As you should have been able to see, Gabriel, all of these terms mean different things, and all of them are more specific and more precise than “violence.” Which is exactly why I prefer to use them. Why on earth would I challenge the use of the category of violence, and then just use the same category with a new label? Your reading simply does not make sense. The whole point is that the myriad things described as violent are dissimilar. Hence the words I use instead are also distinct.

To continue, you claim that a consensus already exists around the term violence, but interestingly, your own arguments demonstrate how you are wrong, or more precisely, only half right (and it’s the wrong half).

“When we say, for example, “Be careful when arguing with John, he can get violent”, we pretty much all know what that means: if John doesn’t like what we say, he might smash our nose in. When we speak of a less violent society, we speak of an end to domestic abuse, gun killings, fist fights at the county fair, and so forth. I think we also have a pretty common understanding of what it means to have violent parents, a violent partner, to grow up in a violent neighborhood, or to fall victim to a violent crime.”

That’s exactly the point. In all of these normalized situations, people know more or less what “violence” means. But readers will notice that your common sense examples lack the one type of situation that is most important to this debate: situations of struggle. If someone says, “the protest will be violent,” or “we will not be violent in our movement,” that is exactly where confusion reigns. In the first sentence, does it mean the police will attack the protest, or the protesters will attack the police, or the protesters will smash banks and avoid direct conflict with the police? Or does it even mean that the protesters will shout insults at the police but nothing else? In real life, each of these very different outcomes are described as “violent” by some and not by others. And in the second sentence, does that mean property destruction is allowed? What about self-defense? In Tahrir Square people described themselves as nonviolent simply because they were not carrying guns. But they did throw molotov cocktails and burn down police stations.

In the middle of the passage I just quoted, you give an important example that is not an everyday usage: “When we speak of a less violent society”. In fact, there is more ambiguity here than you admit. Will a less violent society mean primarily less interpersonal violence, like those fights at the country fair, or will it primarily mean less structural violence, like the starvation that kills many more people than fist fights? Will the State still exist in that less violent society? Are we talking about a peaceful society, or a pacified society? The fact that your common sense interpretation of the phrase focuses on interpersonal violence (“gun killings, fist fights”) and not structural violence is in itself a good indication of how violence, as a category, distracts attention from the bigger problems.

Confusion around the term violence is oh-so-real. The fact that you avoid dealing with this confusion precisely where it matters, in our struggles, and instead talk about some hypothetical John who might smash our nose in, I think is a tacit

of a cop's nose and the carpet bombing of a city in Vietnam unless they are both placed within the same categorical box of "violence." On an analytical level, that difference is extremely important.

You then precede in a way that I find simply disingenuous. I do not say that "violence does not exist" in order to avoid talking about it, as you suggest. In fact, I say that it does not exist, that it is only an arbitrary category, in order to signal a specific way of talking about it. I am very clear about this from the beginning of the chapter. "It is a category, a human construct in which we choose to place a wide array of actions, phenomena, situations, and so forth. "Violence" is whatever the person speaking at the moment decides to describe as violent. Usually, this means things they do not like. As a result, the use of the category "violence" tends towards hypocrisy" (p. 20).

You argue that "violence" is no more ambiguous a category than any other. "Very few terms, especially complex ones, are clearly defined. [5] If our answer to this problem is that these terms can't be used in any meaningful way in discussion, we might as well stop discussing." This is a flippant misrepresentation of my argument. Throughout the chapter, I argue in depth about how "violence" as a moralistic, normative, and subjective category is uniquely prone to not just ambiguity but hypocrisy and a favoring of law and order, and I cite an important social history of the introduction of the category of violence to the discourse on social control as a strategic measure by elites. I also point out that debates around differing interpretations of "freedom," a vague term if there ever were one, are good for us, whereas debates about "violence" can either be a waste of time, because they do not tell us in the end what we actually need, or they can even reinforce dominant social norms. This is also my answer to your question in footnote 6: why spend time debating the ambiguities of revolution, and not the ambiguities of violence. Because one term belongs to us (at least partially), the other does not, and the debate of one of these ideas is necessary in order to engage in revolution, the other is not.

You say that "I think Gelderloos fails in replacing the term "violence" with supposedly less vague and incoherent terms. He writes: "If I have to refer to a body of methods or tactics that are usually excluded by nonviolence, I will talk about 'illegal', 'combative', 'conflictive', or 'forceful' actions, as the case may be." (p. 29) "Illegal" is certainly not incoherent, but it is a good choice? Many nonviolent activists I know do illegal things all the time. And can't a blockade be "conflictive"? The burning of a draft card "combative"? And what exactly is a "forceful" method or tactic?"

Here you reveal an outright misunderstanding. "as the case may be", five words that you quote from my book, are not just filler, but a meaningful phrase. Their meaning is to suggest that I will not use "illegal", "combative," "conflictive", and "forceful" as synonyms. Rather, I will use one word or another, according to the case at hand. The burning of a draft card is not combative, which is why I never refer to it as such. In that case, I would say "illegal." And I would describe a blockade as "conflictive" unless the participants specifically organize it in a way to minimize conflict with the police. A sit-in blockade, for example, is a little conflictive,

gone wrong in this debate?

[17] I'd also encourage Gelderloos, or anybody for that matter, to elaborate on the following: "I'll just ... reiterate the point that those who support a diversity of tactics are not generally satisfied with our struggle, many are self-critical, and many want to be more inclusive." (p. 30) Now, that, I'd find really exciting.

Misrepresentations, but Substantial Differences as Well

A Response to Gabriel Kuhn's "Violence Sells... But Who is Buying?" (a review of The Failure of Nonviolence: From the Arab Spring to Occupy)

Gabriel: on consideration I decided to write this response to you directly, and avoid the formalism and stiffness that only exacerbates disagreements exchanged on paper. Through your review, I think you've opened what might be a useful debate about the imposition of nonviolence in social movements, and methods for struggle that rely on a diversity of tactics. I especially welcome the importance you put in your opening paragraphs on collective self-criticism rather than the drawing of battle lines and the covering up of the weaknesses of one's own team.

I Agree that Nonviolence is not Monolithic

YOU START YOUR criticisms by indicating the heterogeneity of nonviolence. This is a heterogeneity I also acknowledge, although in your mind I do so in a way that is "not entirely clear", "suggesting" the possibility of a better kind of pacifist (in fact, I directly mention such pacifists, rather than just suggesting their existence), yet it is "nonviolence as an exclusive, dogmatic, and absolute position that dominates Gelderloos's account".

Perhaps my difference with you is that I do not take a "live and let live" approach towards advocates of nonviolence. I believe that solidarity must be critical. If it turns out that nonviolence is a nonsensical or treacherous concept, I think it is necessary to say so out loud, rather than accept all differences as legitimate within a democratic framework of diversity. But unlike authoritarian participants in a social movement (including many proponents of nonviolence), I express my rejection of nonviolence with critique, debate, and working with others to create a different kind of struggle. I don't try to exclude, silence, malign, or criminalize those I disagree with. After all, sometimes we are wrong in the things we are sure about. Nonetheless, such a possibility is no reason to not act on one's convictions, especially when doing so, and engaging with critics, is such a great way to learn.

I think that some supporters of nonviolence are motivated by a desire to carry out peaceful activities as part of an effort to change the world. They probably turn to nonviolence because the concept expresses a vision of social change in a language that appeals to them. I think there is a good possibility to work with such

people, as I point out in the Introduction (p. 19). All the same, the philosophy of nonviolence will tend to corrupt their actions, or at the least to unify them with people who are directly working to maintain State power. As I stated in the earlier book (*How Nonviolence Protects the State*) and in the Appendix of the new book (p. 292), nonviolence is a broad category that brings together people fighting for very different things. The category is self-selecting.

I criticize nonviolence because of its intrinsic authoritarian tendencies. Individuals who adhere to nonviolence may successfully resist those tendencies, but their example is no reason to forgive the banner they rally around. Similarly, one might say that Marxism is an intrinsically authoritarian ideology. Are anti-state communists the exception that disproves the rule, or are they a minority current that specifically resists the authoritarian tendency at the heart of their ideology? Someone who believes the latter would continue to criticize Marxism, while also debating and working together with anti-state communists.

To reiterate my argument, “Nonviolence requires a strategic usage of the concept of “violence,” which is moralistic, imprecise, incoherent, and tends towards hypocrisy. We reject nonviolence because it is pacifying, and because it is incoherent. The category of violence is a tool of the State. In using it uncritically, nonviolent activists also become tools” (p. 29). “In countries across the world, nonviolence has constituted a slippery slope towards increasingly pacified tactics. As explained in Chapter 1, placing strategic importance on the category of violence surrenders power to the media to tell us which tactics are acceptable and which are not. Nonviolence, by being anti-conflictual in a society predicated on an irreconcilable conflict, seeks reconciliation with the same authorities who dominate us, and this means a tendency to avoid that which is most controversial in the eyes of power. It was only a matter of time until pacifists define “violence” as “a violation of the law” ” (p. 124).

I think it would be interesting, Gabriel, if you were to write a detailed account about what a diversity of tactics looks like among those who grew up in the German autonomous movement, or even to publish a dialogue with a non-violent anarchist there. I am curious as to what role history plays. Was the State unable to fracture struggles there, as it did in the US? Is the lack of acrimony the reason for a successful diversity of tactics “on the ground”? And what do German supporters of nonviolence have to say about this diversity of tactics, as the existence of a successful diversity of tactics tends to undermine nonviolence, since the latter defines itself as a rejection of violence, in other words a rejection of everything beyond itself that makes up the diversity of tactics? Are they more accurately pacifists who see theirs as an exclusively personal practice they do not expect of others? Or do they still try to discourage others from taking actions they would view as violent?

All the same, the difference in our approaches cannot be chalked entirely up to the differences in the places where we live. For one thing, many of the topics dealt with in the book transcend their immediate context, such as the Color Revolutions or the Arab Spring. Another substantial part of the book deals with the sort of default, societal nonviolence that appears when large numbers of people

start taking to the streets for the first time. If a spontaneous popular movement were to appear in Austria or Germany, on the scale of Occupy or the plaza occupations, I would bet that you would suddenly come face to face with the same kind of authoritarian, unsolidaristic, reformist, and incoherent kind of pacifist that dominated the streets for a brief while in North America, the UK, and southern Europe. In my book I also address the kind of hidden nonviolence that does not challenge the idea of combative struggles openly, having already lost that debate, but resorts to other methods to preserve the social peace by delegitimizing any non-peaceful attempts to struggle. Such nonviolence, which holds a majority across Europe and North America nowadays, does not arise out of historical struggles but out of a fear of violence, especially the violence of the Other. I know that in Sweden, which is certainly not out of your ken, Gabriel, such crypto-pacifist responses to the various immigrant riots in the last four years have been sadly common.

Therefore, even though you and I came of age in vastly different situations, and your situation does provide a vibrant example of a successful diversity of tactics in which nonviolent radicals play an important role, it is simply not true that we have not come in contact with the same kinds of nonviolence.

Confusion about Terminology

GABRIEL, I AM AFRAID I found your section on terminology to be flawed to the point of confused. I'll try to say how while upholding the friendly, respectful tone that you used. In this case, I think the confusion could have been averted by simply rereading what I had written. Given the quantity of misinterpretations, especially in the section on terminology, I think it deserves to be mentioned—delicately—that your astoundingly lengthy review came out in a surprisingly short time after the book was released. While I am glad you have gone into such detail, opening the door for a rich and substantial debate rather than one based on the usual clichés, such hastiness is not always a good thing.

Let's see. You start off taking me to task for saying that violence is not a “thing”, pointing out that “neither is the state, capitalism, racism, sexism, or anarchy. Does this mean that none of these phenomena exist?”

I know that you are a capable thinker who understands the difference between an object, a social structure, and a category. Unfortunately, when we talk about nonviolence today we cannot assume that everyone else is on the same page. Many people see violence as some sort of essence. This is abundantly reflected in nonviolent reasoning, e.g. the obnoxiously common argument that “violence begets more violence”. This ignorance is one that many proponents of nonviolence unfortunately exploit. To make any progress, it is necessary to explain that violence is a category. Hence, it is not a “thing” but a sort of basket that we put things into.

I would disagree with you about your understanding of “things” (as comical as that might sound). I would say that the State is indeed a thing, although not a concrete thing. It is a system of institutions, structures, infrastructure, and culture that function as a unified whole. There is no unity between the breaking